

10th Session – United Nations Forum on Minority Issues

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Background

I speak on behalf of the Malay Muslim youth from Patani, the southern border provinces of Thailand, where a conflict between Patani insurgency movements and the Thai state has been ongoing. Since 2004 the Martial Law, the Emergency Decree, and the Internal Security Act have been imposed, the powers of state authorities through works of national security forces have been predominantly limitless. As a consequence, my generation has been witnessing 14 years of racial and religious discrimination and limited rights to the freedom of expression, including fundamental rights to discuss our local histories, grievances and political views in academia and in public. I appreciate the Thai government's efforts to solve the conflict, especially the continuous negotiation with the political wing of members of the insurgency and the recent decision to drop the charges against the three human rights defenders who reported torture allegations committed by Thai national security forces to the UN earlier this year. However, to solve the complicated conflict in Patani, important instruments for the long-term solution are required, including changing the mindset of youth through education, promoting Malay language at the minimum as a working language, and ensuring security of youth participation in the media.

Item 1 - Inclusive education to empower minority youth

Patani's history as a former independent sultanate and a center of power struggle during the colonization period has been cited as a root cause of the conflict. However, the local history has neither been acknowledged by the Thai State nor been encouraged to be discussed in the national curriculum of Thai education. Therefore, majority Thais are not well informed about the historical trajectories of the conflict, leading to a misunderstanding that Patani people are national traitors driven by Islamic radicalisation. Consequentially, this leads to racial and religious discrimination towards the Malay Muslim minority.

Recommendation: The Thai government should promote the recognition of the Malay minority and their history in the national curriculum and also promote regional histories more broadly, including histories of other ethnic minorities to normalize pluralism, the sharing of different cultures, traditions, and languages that we share with our neighbors in the Malay peninsula. This will in turn encourage the fostering of economic cooperation within ASEAN in the future.

Item 2 – Participation of minority youth in public life

Malay is the mother tongue of Patani people, however, the language tends to be taken over by Thai language once children enroll into the national education system in which all lessons from kindergartens to universities are conducted in Thai.

Recommendation: The Thai government should support the use of Malay language in public life of the Malay Muslim youth and to recognize Malay language as a working language, including at government offices in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat as well as in the four sub-districts of Songkhla province. The same practice should also apply to other languages of minority groups throughout Thailand. Languages will help them preserve their identities and will tremendously empower Malay Muslim youths, because it will provide them with more employment opportunities. On the other hand, Thailand will crucially benefit from the diversified use of different languages and the human capital of empowered youth.

Item 3 – Minority youth and the media in the digital age: acceptance and opportunity

In Thailand minority youths have access to the social media. Thanks to the government and the private sector in our country for their work on improvement of technology. However, one of the critical problems is the backlash that they receive when they generate discussions relating to politics and human rights violations that they have witnessed in their localities amidst the dynamics of the conflict. Their Facebook posts and photos are repeatedly used for discreditation and accusation, for example, often active youths are accused of being national traitors or separatists when they acknowledge the wrongdoings of the national security forces. Some victims have reported their cases to the police, but no investigation has been seriously conducted, and this might be counted as a form of discrimination. If the State does not try to understand and tolerate diversity of political views and if the state does not try to welcome discussions with minority youths, it would be difficult to mobilize inclusive development of the country.

Recommendation: The Thai government should ensure security of young people who would like to take part in discussions through different media platforms and strive to tolerate pluralism in freedom of expressions.